



SEVENTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME

THEME "Environment"

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Collaborative Project

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consumption and production: linking scientists,
policymakers and civil society organizations**

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between researchers, policymakers and CSOs**

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1. Introduction

This report draws out the lessons learned during our experiments with knowledge brokerage and collaboration of scientists, policymakers and civil society organisations in three Communities of Practice that we organised around the issue of sustainable food production and consumption. We make use of the material collected through various monitoring and evaluating exercises, the results of which have been described in deliverable D6.1 (evaluation report) and deliverable D7.1 (synthesis report). We also integrate the insights generated through our reflection workshop (D7.2), in which we exchanged experience with partners from other knowledge brokerage projects.

Based on this collected material we formulate recommendations for the intentional creation and practical implementation of a specific type of Communities of Practice: with an international and geographically spread out membership, that aims at sharing but also co-production of knowledge and that starts off with a stable number of core members. They can serve as a guide for future knowledge brokerage activities between researchers, policymakers, and civil society organisations in various domains of work. The recommendations are not specific for the domain of sustainable food production or consumption but assume that there is a common area of interest that encourages collaboration. Recommendations for promoting sustainable food systems are included in the policy brief (D8.3) and elaborated in the three documents produced by the Communities of Practice that can be retrieved from the project website: www.foodlinkscommunity.net.

2. Recommendations

Communities of Practice as a tool for knowledge brokerage

Communities of Practice are a valuable tool for organising knowledge brokerage between policymakers, scientists and civil society organisations.

Communities of Practice should be organised around an issue of mutual concern, that requires collaboration between the three groups to be adequately addressed.

Future members should be involved in the design of the communities at an early stage to assure a sense of ownership that supports equal participation. Funds for setting up the community can enable also groups with few resources to engage in the community design.

Membership and enrolment

Diversity in membership and the participation of key actors enhances the relevance of knowledge brokerage. An ex ante stakeholder mapping helps to identify the key actors.

The participation of stakeholders should be balanced in terms of roles and numbers to assure equaity among community members.

Boundaries between actor groups (e.g. policymakers vs. researchers) are unintentionally reconfirmed when choosing actors according to stakeholder categories; it is advisable to 'play' with boundary settings regularly and regroup members according to new criteria. This reshuffles positions and opens up new views.

Community members need to be willing to cross the borders of their own domain and working culture; they need to be ready to develop a new language and common understanding of the purpose of their collaboration. This requires empathy and patience as well as curiosity and creativity, and is in particular supported by face to face interaction.

Participation in Communities of Practice usually competes with other activities. It is, therefore, crucial to make participation easy and to support it with sufficient resources.

At the start of the communities it is important to encourage the members to explore each other's viewpoints as it raises awareness of the added value of diversity in the group and allows members to link their different life worlds, interests and perspectives.

In order to ensure that the communication process does not rely on few key individuals, Communities of Practice need to include a considerable number of participants. The minimum number increases significantly when communication takes place mainly online.

An active core groups of people keeps the larger community alive and discussions on-going.

Facilitation of Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice need Leadership and facilitation especially in the beginning to engage members in regular communication and provide a sense of direction.

It is best to appoint one person as facilitator and leader who initiates activities and provides guidance throughout the process of collaboration.

Once Communities of Practice are up and running, and members have gained experience in organising communication, facilitation may also be rotated as long as there is a facilitator in charge at any moment.

Allowing for rotating facilitation ensures a broader spectrum of skills and expertise and allows for a variation in leadership styles.

A good facilitator needs experience in managing group dynamics and in organising knowledge brokerage online and face-to-face. S/he needs to understand the different languages spoken among the community members and to be capable of bridging the differences in background.

A facilitator needs to be able to dedicate considerable time to the management of the community. Online communication needs daily maintenance.

In order to encourage a sense of ownership within the community it is important to regularly assign specific tasks and responsibilities to community members.

In international communities it is important to deal with language barriers and to regularly employ tools that do not rely on language proficiency.

In professionally mixed communities it is important to prevent the use of jargon to impede effective communication.

It is important to regularly check if language barriers hamper communication. The facilitator should assure that speakers do not talk too fast or use specific jargon, and should regularly ask if everything is clear. Organising communication in smaller group settings can be helpful.

Planning budget for interpretation and translation (e.g. for disseminating results) helps to overcome language barriers.

The circulation of detailed minutes for comments helps those with less distinct verbal skills to catch up with the outcomes of activities.

Goal and mission

Communities of Practice need to invest time in a problem defining phase, where goals and objectives are clarified and a common understanding of aims is reached.

Participation in Communities of Practice should create value for their member on the short and longer terms. Since communities thrive on the value that they deliver, it is important to make this value visible by regularly reflection/

Collaboration needs purpose and a plan of action as guidance and encouragement of active participation.

A community action plan should accommodate the variety in cultural and organisational background and different working routines.

Collaboration should result in tangible outcomes as they give direction to community activities and encourage contributions especially when the products support the members' work outside the community.

Producing tangible outcomes provides an instrument for recognising and integrating the variety of knowledge and experience present in the Community of Practice.

On-line and off-line collaboration

Face to face activities are important for developing trust and a sense of community and affinity, and to nurture the willingness to remain actively involved.

Online interaction builds on face to face processes and have a clear complementary purpose especially in the starting phase of the community.

Online interaction needs to be encouraged on a daily basis.

Online interaction offers an un-costly opportunity to follow up on face-to-face meeting, maintain regular interaction, and to expand participation and membership.

Communities of Practice that rely heavily on on-line communication, need to choose an online platform that is easy to use, and accessible for all community members (check firewall limitations).

Choosing the right software is decisive: freeware is easily accessible, but not always easy to manage; various software might be blocked by firewalls of institutes.

In order to ensure continuity and long term persistence it is important to create a durable online platform for communication.

Community members often need assistance and training in getting familiar with on-line communication.

Fixing a date and time for concerted online activities supports active participaton.

Choice of knowledge brokerage tools

When selecting specific knowledge brokerage tools it is important to consider the pleasure derived from their application. The 'Fun factor' of knowledge brokerage tools acts as an important driver of effective knowledge exchange.

When offering a pool of tools for facilitation it is important to explain how the tools work and which specific added value can be expected from their application.

Using different tools produces cumulative value as the outcome of one tool can feed into another tool. When selecting knowledge brokerage tools their iterative use should be considered. Learning enhances with the right combination and sequence of tools.

Some tools need preparation for effective application, and some need participant training.

In international communities it is important to choose tools that do not require language proficiency and help overcoming linguistic barriers (for instance visualisation tools such as mind mapping).

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